

Role of intercultural mediation in problem solving in a transatlantic network

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Abstract

Working in a multidisciplinary collaborative project through virtual exchange encompasses many advantages as well as some disadvantages. One of the many problems that might occur in virtual cooperation settings was identified as cultural mismatches, listed by Chase, Macfadyen, Reeder, and Roche (2002) into nine categories. Some of these mismatches were found during the Trans-Atlantic Pacific Project¹ (TAPP), a collaborative and active learning bidirectional platform, where students from Portuguese and North American universities have been cooperating for several years to enhance their technical and linguistic competences whilst developing intercultural skills. By bringing together future Translators and Technical Writers into a multicultural simulated setting, students are given the opportunity to learn from each other and interact via technology-mediated communication. Yet, this endeavour revealed to be extremely demanding mostly due to cultural misunderstandings that occurred during virtual communication exchanges. Accordingly, a cultural mediation intervention plan was developed and implemented by the authors as a strategy to overcome these problems and strengthen virtual teamwork interaction. This plan was designed to raise cultural awareness of the self and the other and was divided into 4 separate phases: 1) the cultural awareness initial stage, followed by 2) peer-to-peer exchange of the pre-learning questionnaires, 3) the completion of the Cultural Self-Awareness Questionnaire, concluding with 4) the analysis of the results and discussion in class. This study addresses the Cultural Self-Awareness Questionnaire. The results and outcomes of this questionnaire are analysed and discussed and new avenues for research will be presented and proposed.

Keywords: *intercultural self-awareness, mediation, TAPP project, communication*

¹ More information on TAPP is available at:
https://www.ndsu.edu/english/transatlantic_and_pacific_translations/

The intercultural mediation at ISCAP/IPP

In 2015, ISCAP began its participation in the Trans-Atlantic and Pacific Project. ISCAP has since then participated with third-year students of the Administrative Assistance and Translation Degree, enrolled in the courses of Translation of Technical Text (I and II). In this project, students from ISCAP/IPP and North American universities cooperate to enhance their technical and linguistic competences whilst developing intercultural skills. By bringing together future Translators and Technical Writers into a multicultural simulated setting, students are given the opportunity to learn from each other and interact via technology-mediated communication. Adding to this, “innovative technological tools increasingly provide the means to replicate the changing work processes in the writing-translation industry, in particular, the movement from bidirectional, asynchronous communication to shared, synchronous communication (...)”. (Vandepitte, Maylath, Moustén, Isohela & Minacori, 2016. p.13). Throughout the years, a considerable number of students and instructors from all over the world have been part of the project, and numerous publications have resulted from their collaboration (for a comprehensive list visit the webpage in footnote 1).

While projects are always mediated by instructors from both countries, the fact is that over the years, both Portuguese instructors and students have reported the existence of issues, which, from our studies, were identified as cultural misunderstandings occurring in virtual online interactions. In the academic year 2018/19, a cultural mediation intervention plan was developed and implemented by the authors as a strategy to overcome these problems and strengthen virtual teamwork interaction. This intervention, as described elsewhere (Cunha et al., 2020), was designed to raise cultural awareness of the self and the other and was divided into four separate phases: 1) the cultural awareness initial stage, followed by 2) peer-to-peer exchange of the pre-learning questionnaires, 3) the completion of the cultural self-awareness questionnaire by both cohorts, and finally 4) the analysis of the results and discussion in class.

Our main focus in this manuscript is the analysis of phase three - the CSAQ - which was answered by both cohorts (North American and Portuguese students) and the discussion of the benefits/issues withdrawn from this intervention, in the section that follows.

Cultural Self-Awareness Questionnaire

In the academic year 2018/19, the teachers involved in TAPP decided to implement a cultural mediation intervention plan to surpass what was perceived to be a lack of self-awareness and that of others during online communicative situations. One of different steps of this intervention, included a CSAQ (see previous section). An online questionnaire was created in a free of charge platform (polljunkie.com) and sent separately to the Portuguese and North American students by their respective

instructors, in April 2019. A total of 68 answers were collected: 46 North American students and 32 Portuguese students. The survey consisted of eighteen, poll-like questions in which students were asked to choose between two contrasting statements, as shown in Figure 1².



Figure 1 – Example drawn from the CSAQ

The questionnaire enabled the students' appraisal of their own attitudes and perceptions, both individually and collectively, paving the way to further reflection on how differences may/may not affect one's responsiveness to the others.

The first item 'Participation format' (questions #4, 5, 6, 9, 11) refers to the attitude towards leadership; autonomy and hierarchy in terms of shared responsibility or authority; the levels of command or collective decisions; individual or teamwork preferences. At this level, students acknowledge their own perception of the self as a part of the whole.

As to the need to exchange opinions and ideas within a community, the levels of comfort with communication (questions #1, 2, 3) were examined to assess the students' preferences on how to receive instructions or directions; their views toward a more specific or more general communication strategy; and the reaction to positive or negative feedback. By acknowledging one's level of (dis)comfort towards others, especially the way communication circulates among individuals, may help understand the reasons underlying some intercultural misunderstandings.

Another group of questions refers to the participants' expectations (questions #7, 8, 10, 12) in which their inner assumptions towards the group and the way the group interferes with their functional output were studied. As individual and collective needs may sometimes overlap, participants were asked to reflect on the extent to which their interpersonal relations are based on respect, mutual consideration, and social interactions.

The response to 'other' cultures (questions #16, 17, 18) refers to the attitudinal approach followed by the participants when conflict is foreseeable. Despite all societal efforts to embrace differences, the existence of punctual critical situations is

² Complete questionnaire in Portuguese is available here:
<http://www.polljunkie.com/poll/qessok/cultural-profile-tapp-2019/view>
 The North American questionnaire is available here:
<http://www.polljunkie.com/poll/bzbdio/cultural-profile-tapp-2019-us/view>

acknowledged and expected to occur in collective interactions. As such, participants were asked to reflect on their reaction to friction and dissension and enhance self-awareness for the benefit of avoiding critical situations.

The final items highlighted attitudes to time and punctuality (questions #13, 14, 15) and their impact on group performance. The opposing views of monochronic or polychronic time as observed by Hall (1983) and the priorities given to human relationships over task accomplishment affect the ways in which groups interact. As a potential source of conflict in intercultural exchanges, the concept of time was deemed to be pivotal in this intervention.

Discussion of the results

After completing the CSAQ, a total of 68 responses were collected and analysed in light of five of the categories identified by Chafe and colleagues (2002), as mentioned previously. Also as aforementioned, 46 respondents were North American and 32 were Portuguese. Both groups answered the survey online and the results were discussed separately in each group-country.

As Portuguese instructors, based on prior TAPP experiences and sustained on students' descriptions of their own experiences, it was our belief that cultural misunderstandings occurring in virtual online interactions were accountable for the problems reported by the Portuguese students over the years.

However, contrary to our initial prediction, results from the CSAQ seem to indicate that no major cultural mismatches were perceived in the detailed analysis conducted in both groups. Out of the five items, significant differences were only identified in two: participation format and response to the other culture.

In terms of level of (dis)comfort with communication, both Portuguese and North American respondents assertively recognized the importance of receiving specific instructions (84% and 80% respectively) and direct feedback (93% and 97%) in addition to assuming that communication should be unequivocal and pertinent (90% and 86%).

In terms of participants' expectations, both groups concur that they prefer to be responsible for their own work (75% and 69%, Portuguese and North Americans respectively) and they respect individuals' needs (78% and 84%). Whilst endorsing the values of individuality, they affirmed the relevance of knowing the 'other' (84% and 82%) and the benefits of socializing with colleagues (65% and 58%). The latter question seemed to be less consensual as many of the Portuguese and North American respondents stated that they prefer to keep their social life separate from their work life.

Quite surprising were the concordant attitudes to time and punctuality from both groups. Both Portuguese and North American confessed their preference to keep to

schedules (68% and 69% respectively), the need to be punctual (75% and 56%) and they condemned others for disregarding punctuality (75% and 69%). Contrary to our expectations as instructors and to our own experience as teachers at ISCAP for over 20 years, the majority of the Portuguese students showed a more rigid inclination towards punctuality whereas North Americans seemed to be less rigorous with time. This could be a factor of discordance between both groups as a significant number of US students revealed a more flexible concept of time and did not follow a strict timetable.

Although results showed a surprising number of similarities in both groups' responses, some striking differences were identified from which cultural mismatches could derive.

One of the answers (question #4) shows a clear difference between both groups regarding the participation format of the intercultural exchange. The majority of the US students state their propensity towards a clear definition of the person in charge while their Portuguese counterparts advocate that all elements in a group should share responsibilities. A surprisingly different viewpoint was displayed in a subsequent item referring to the preferences of working in collaborative structures. North American participants acknowledge to working better when information and ideas circulate freely within the community, regardless of hierarchical levels. As for the Portuguese students, 56% of the respondents prefer having clear chains of command.

Another topic of disagreement was shown in the level of (dis)comfort in communication. Two items in the questionnaire revealed a clear dissimilarity in both groups when conflict arises in collaborative settings. Whilst the Portuguese appear to be dismissive in response to the 'other' culture, North Americans adopt a more confrontational approach. Portuguese students seem to prefer distancing themselves from possible conflict, either avoiding it or facing it with tension and distress. Opposed to this, the North American counterparts reveal a more assertive stance, voicing their need to address possible conflicts in communication openly, mainly when problems are imminent.

Conclusions

The Trans-Atlantic Pacific Project (TAPP) is a collaborative and active learning bidirectional learning platform, where students cooperate in order to enhance their technical and linguistic competences whilst developing intercultural skills. Future Translators and Technical Writers are given the opportunity to learn from each other and interact via technology-mediated communication. The project is extremely demanding mostly due to possible cultural misunderstandings that may arise, especially when resorting to virtual communication. A cultural mediation intervention plan was developed and implemented to overcome identified problems and strengthen virtual teamwork interaction. The work presented here focused only on the results obtained from the Cultural Self-Awareness Questionnaire answered by Portuguese and North American students and the results show, in most cases, no significant perceived

cultural mismatches. In fact, the concordant attitudes in most items were perhaps more surprising for the instructors than for the students involved. The only striking differences focused on two particular aspects: participation format (ill-structured vs. highly defined processes) and response to other cultures, namely response to conflicts (confrontational vs. passive attitudes). Whilst we were not expecting the first aspect, the latter was consistent with our expectations.

The results presented reveal that most students' expectations and points of view are consistent but expose perhaps a third unexpected fragility: the instructors and their roles.

How do instructors' expectations factor into these types of projects? Do their expectations influence the expectations and the work of their students? This obviously raises questions that we, as teachers and mediators cannot ignore. Indeed, when instructors first meet the students and explain the TAPP project, it is usual to refer to previous editions and to describe and comment on events and issues that have arisen over the years and how they have been overcome by both students and instructors. That being the case, throughout the numerous editions, instructors have undoubtedly undergone changes – they have learnt from experience and built on previous shared knowledge. Therefore, instructors' introduction to a new edition of the Project, by providing insights into past issues, might, in a way, alert students to the need to be aware of how other cultures may behave; to how they may interact or respond differently; to different ways of working (such as in the use of technology or in the concept of time). Thus, a more recent collaboration may be influenced by previous cross-cultural and intercultural communication findings³.

Additionally, over the years technology has evolved exponentially, with direct consequences on virtual collaborative forms and environments on both sides of the Ocean. What may, a short while ago, have been perceived as a mismatch, may no longer be seen as such as students from both nationalities seem to have embedded similar virtual communication strategies into their daily lives, and into their learning environments.

In sum, the instructor, by providing insights and disclosing past issues, is sharing knowledge, and shedding light on possible perceptions and expectations and, in a way, demystifying any similar thoughts the new group may have had, presenting new possible paths, while perhaps unintentionally neutralizing intercultural mismatches and misconceptions. In light of the above, it is perhaps feasible to say that the focus lies on the instructor, his/her role within the teaching and learning process and the constantly evolving situations, proving that the exponential changes brought about by technology

³ According to Levine, Park and Kim (2007), "cross-cultural communication involves comparing and contrasting the communication patterns of people of one culture with the communication patterns observed in people from a different culture. Intercultural communication research deals with the interaction between people of different cultures." (p. 208)

have tangible impact on higher education and on the roles of the stakeholders involved: instructors and students.

In the end, the question remains: to what extent are cultural mismatches in collaborative learning environments prevented by the efficient mediating role of the instructor; or, conversely, are they due to long-term exposure to technology-mediated interaction in students' personal and academic life, which seems to lead to shared 'globalized' communication strategies? One way of addressing these questions, in future TAPP collaborations, may be to have some groups of students undergoing the cultural mediation intervention plan, while others participate in the project without prior cultural awareness alerts.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to understand if these conclusions are coherent with those from other cohorts involved in TAPP. Finally, we would say that the shift in roles, shifts teaching and learning dynamics. We propose that this perspective – the shift in instructor roles – be considered and studied by multiple TAPP participants in order to gain deeper insights into the cross influences and implications these changes may have/be having on a project of this scale.

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